

Brand publics participatory approach via influencers in strategic communications

by

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## **Abstract**

The current study aims to examine current practices, experiences, and expectations of the PR industry regarding the relationship between brands-influencers-audiences in strategic communications through in-depth interviews with professional practitioners. The discussion will then be combined with the suggestions of the literature to introduce a new approach to engaging with the public through corporate communication efforts. The new approach focuses on promoting the customer participatory culture, where brands not only persuade their customers to buy their products, or increase their brand reputation through paid advertising and PR efforts, but also develop genuine two-way relationships with their public, to receive feedback and constructive comments to better serve their customers, using influencers as the facilitator.

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## **Dedication**

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## Introduction

The current marketing and strategic communication practices have turned influencers into paid media channels. The influencers only say what they are paid by brands to say, endorsing the products they might not even choose to use. From in-depth interviews with 31 senior PR professionals in Australia, Wolf and Archer (2018) reported that current PR practices were using influencers as a tool for marketing and communications, who are paid to say what the brands want. PR practitioners had shifted from the traditional, normative relationship-building model to a commercial model of working with influencers via paid contracts. Sponsored content has been found to damage the perception of trust of the audiences toward the social media influencer (Dwidienawati et al., 2019; Hudders et al., 2021; Konstantopoulou et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, some major brands, e.g. Google, have started to consider the ethical aspect of paying influencers for brand endorsement. These brands believe that similar to the mainstream media, influencers should be able to generate unbiased, legitimate endorsements for the brand without being manipulated by paid contracts. The new codes of conduct require PR teams and agencies to completely depend on their story pitching for relationship-building instead of paying the influencers to say what the PR practitioners want. In line with this idea, researchers have also argued that influencers should advocate a brand or a PR project because they understand and embrace their values and vision (Boerman et al., 2017; Erdogan, 1999; Wolf and Archer, 2018).

Research on Vietnamese audiences found similar evidence to the Western literature on influencers' effects on audiences. Vietnamese consumers were also suggested to be influenced by social media influencers in terms of purchase intention (Le, 2020; Le et al., 2021; Pham et al., 2021) and brand awareness (Nguyen, 2020). Vietnamese Gen Z were found to spend a considerable amount of time on YouTube vlogs and consider YouTube vlogs as an efficient



source for information and reviews about products or services of their interest as consumers (Le, 2020). Otherwise, there has not been much research on customer engagement and participatory culture on social media in Vietnam since it is more of a Western-rooted concept. The majority of current research on Vietnamese consumers' feedback and comments is more focused on their function as the digital form of word of mouth (e-WOM) to transfer information between consumers (Do & Pereira, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020), instead of as two-way communication between consumers and brands. Nevertheless, consumer behavior research by Deloitte (2022) suggests that digital channels were gaining their roles in influencing Vietnamese consumers' buying intention by establishing a two-way communication channel for direct comments and feedback toward brands.

Given that context, in addition to the author's knowledge and familiarity with the market, the current report focused on the Vietnam market to examine how communication tactics via influencers are practiced. The findings are expected to contribute to influencer theories and literature by examining them in a cross-cultural context, which also shared similar characteristics with the general global market. The author acknowledged that two-way communication in a democratic approach is not as familiar a concept to Vietnamese audiences as in the Western countries. However, given the power of interactivity brought by the Internet and social networks, and based on the literature on Vietnamese consumer behaviors, it can be argued that research findings from Vietnam market have relevant and significant meanings as an extension to the literature of influencer strategic communication in general.

Guided by the Excellence Theory, which suggests the two-way symmetrical communication model as the normative approach for PR practice, this study explores the motivations behind this code of conduct and practical solutions for coping with it. The goals of

this paper are to examine current practices, experiences, and expectations of the PR industry regarding the relationship between brands-influencers-audiences in strategic communications through in-depth interviews with professional practitioners. The discussion will then be combined with the suggestions of the literature to propose practical implications in the form of a new framework for engaging with the public in corporate communication efforts. The new approach focuses on promoting the customer participatory culture, where brands not only persuade their customers to buy products, or increase brand reputation through paid advertising and PR efforts, but also develop genuine two-way relationships with their publics, to receive feedback and constructive comments to better serve their customers. It proposes that influencers should play the role of the facilitator in this dialogic practice.

## **Literature Review**

Among the new media emerging alongside the Internet like online newspapers, blogs, and social networks, YouTube is considered a successful case in terms of its mainstream popularity. As a video platform for user-generated content, YouTube has become a significant subject for scientific research as the next generation of traditional television, surpassing its precedent for instability due to its nature of dynamic change, content diversity, and dense frequency (Burgess & Green, 2009). Researchers have been taking an interest in YouTube's function as a platform for user-generated content (Van Dijck, 2009; Waldron, 2013) that allows consumers to also become the content contributors, creators, and producers. This is believed to promote participatory culture among the users of this platform (Burgess & Green, 2009; Chau, 2010).

By giving every user the platform and opportunity to share their videos with the world, YouTube has created a new generation of influencers and internet celebrities (Burgess & Green,

2009; Jerslev, 2016; Smith, 2016). One of the most distinctive characteristics of this new generation of celebrities is their relationship, engagement, and interaction with their fans and audiences, empowered by digital intimacy, defined as a one-way relationship from the audience toward the media persona they are exposed to (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). This new generation of social media influencers has been considered to be more effective as a marketing channel than traditional celebrities (Reinikainen et al., 2020). They are perceived as more credible and relatable (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), and are able to develop virtual intimacy with their audiences. Hence, YouTube influencers, as endorsers of brand messages and advertising campaigns, can positively affect their audience's brand trust, purchase attention, and brand loyalty (Jun & Yi, 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2018).

Literature also identified three main players in the management of strategic influencer communications, including the organization, the agency, and the influencers themselves (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Sundermann & Raabe, 2019). These players have distinctive roles, goals, and expectations in this relationship. The organization PR teams focus on building their brand reputation and promoting their products, using influencers as a part of their strategic communication plans. Their first and foremost interest lies in the benefit of a specific brand. While PR agencies represent a broader perspective, as they working on behalf of multiple clients, with the goal to satisfy the client's demands. In other words, although both considered as PR practitioners, the brand communication team's objectives are more about serving the long-term goals and objectives of their organization, while PR agency only cares about the immediate outcomes of certain PR campaigns. On the other end of the relationship are influencers, whose dynamic characteristics and developments were creating significant challenges for even the most experienced PR practitioners looking to engage with them for communication tactics (Wolf and

Archer, 2018). Hence, the current study includes these three players in the investigation of strategic influencer communication practice to provide a comprehensive empirical background for the application of the public participatory approach.

### **YouTuber's multifaceted influence on viewers**

YouTube influencers, commonly known as 'YouTubers,' influence their audiences in two major directions: as opinion leaders and through virtual intimacy (Hudders et al., 2021). Aside from the traditional role of opinion leaders in the information flow process, YouTubers are able to establish a strong sense of virtual bond with their audiences that have been identified as 'parasocial interaction.' Previous studies suggested that these parasocial interactions are an efficient and powerful approach to promoting business or products (Rasmussen, 2018), especially when empowered by the interactivity of digital platforms like YouTube. The ability to form stronger parasocial interactions and evoke deeper virtual intimacy is believed to be what makes YouTubers stand out from mainstream celebrities when it comes to connecting with their audiences (Ferchaud et al., 2018; Rasmussen, 2018). These facets of influence allow YouTubers to establish a deeper engagement and more meaningful relationship with their audiences, compared to traditional celebrities and opinion leaders.

### **A new generation of opinion leaders**

The role of opinion leaders was initially proposed in the two-step information flow model by Lazarsfeld et al. (1948), where the mass public receives information through opinion leaders. The model went through several criticisms and innovations before gaining back its relevance in the digital age, with the emergence of social media influencers, who also play the role of opinion leaders (Choi, 2014; Thorson and Wells, 2012). As the mediator of the information flow process, opinion leaders can influence the attitudes and opinions of their audiences. There are several

factors suggested by scholars that can determine social media influencers' power as opinion leaders, namely, trustworthiness and expertise (Hudders, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Source credibility, impacted by perceived trustworthiness and expertise, is suggested to be an important predictor of an influencer's effectiveness in shaping audience attitudes and opinions. Perceived expertise refers to the audience's perception of the media persona's knowledge, competence, or capacity in specific fields (McCroskey, 1966). Perceived trustworthiness refers to how much the audiences trust the media persona to be honest, sincere, or truthful in what they said or do (Giffin, 1967). Source credibility is considered to have a positive impact on information credibility, in another word, people tend to believe more in the information given by the source that they perceive as more credible (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Source credibility also determines the effectiveness of the key message (Xiao et al., 2018).

### **Virtual intimacy through parasocial relationship**

Parasocial interaction refers to a phenomenon described by Horton and Wohl (1956) as the development of one-sided relationships between the audiences toward a media persona in television, radio, and cinema. The key characteristics of this born-by-the-media relationship include nonreciprocal, nondialectical, and no mutual development. Horton and Wohl (1956) also noted that parasocial interaction is "controlled by the performer" (p.215). The parasocial interactions are triggered by the media personas, adopted one-way by the audiences, yet developed as a reciprocal relationship, subconsciously perceived as face-to-face communication (Rubin & Rubin, 1985). Through constant exposure and repeated engagement in parasocial interaction, audiences would gradually develop a parasocial relationship with the media persona (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Originally, research on parasocial interaction mostly focuses on traditional media, e.g. television and soap opera programs. However, the parasocial interactions toward social media figures are believed to be even more intensive than that of traditional media, due to the fact that users may think it is easier and more possible for them to have direct contact and generate a sense of intimacy with the media figure (Hartmann, 2016; Rihl & Wegener, 2017). Among social media platforms, YouTube is suggested to be more a conducive environment for parasocial interactions (Chen, 2016; Ferchaud et al., 2018; Hartmann, 2016; Rihl & Wegener, 2017). Since YouTube has become an increasingly influential form of video content media channel with the potential of establishing a more than ever intimacy between the media characters and their audience, many researchers have set out to explore the phenomenon in this new media (Chen, 2014; Ferchaud et al., 2018). Most studies focus on determining the existence of the parasocial relationship toward YouTube creators, as well as its influence on the viewer's product-consuming intention and brand trust (Rasmussen, 2018; Reinikainen, 2020), or their behaviors (de Bérail et al., 2019; Tolbert & Drogos. 2019; Sokolova & Perez, 2021). Parasocial relationships and interactions have been suggested as the driver of YouTubers' influence on their audiences, as well as audiences' perception of YouTuber's relatability, credibility, and trustworthiness (Rasmussen, 2018; Reinikainen, 2020).

Throughout the literature on the parasocial relationship, there have been efforts to distinguish the parasocial terminology, to differentiate 'parasocial interactions' from 'parasocial relationship.' The original conceptualization by Horton and Wohl (1956) stated that the term parasocial interaction refers to an illusional sense of interaction that occurs only during media exposure situations, while parasocial relationship characterizes by its long-term nature, which may develop over a long time with constant exposure. This idea was adopted and supported by a

group of scholars (Dibble & Rosaen, 2011; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006; Rosaen & Dibble, 2012). Meanwhile, there was another influential approach that nullified the distinction between these two concepts, firstly introduced by Nordlund (1978), later adopted by Rubin et al. (1985) in a widely cited article that proposed a measurement toolkit for parasocial interaction called PSI-Scale. PSI-Scale takes into consideration both the immediate and long-term parasocial involvement as forms of parasocial interaction, which diluted the boundary between parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship. Dibble et al. (2016) conducted a review of these two terms and tested the measuring ability of the PSI-Scale in comparison with Hartmann and Goldhoorn's (2011) Experience of Parasocial Interaction (EPSI) Scale, which was designed to measure only the immediate parasocial interaction in respect to Horton and Wohl's (1956) conceptualization. The result supported the idea that 'parasocial interaction' and 'parasocial relationship' refer to distinctive theoretical concepts.

Nevertheless, the current study acknowledges the dominance of the PSI-Scale in the literature on the parasocial phenomenon, as well as the terminology inconsistency in the use of 'parasocial interaction' and 'parasocial relationship' in a majority of studies due to the confusing development of these concepts. Hence, within the current paper, all aspects of parasocial involvement, both immediate and long-term are taken into consideration as contributors to increase audience engagement with YouTube influencers.

In addition to these research-suggested criteria, in order to add practical perspectives to the implications, the first research question focuses on exploring the real-world requirements of influencer selection for strategic communication campaigns. The findings are expected to also confirm the practitioners' opinions and applications of these influencer selection criteria. Since this study emphasizes the role of the influencer not just as a voice to speak what the brand wants,

but also as a connector to help the brand understand its customers better and help the customers communicate with the brand, it is important to understand the expectation of the brand on influencer selection criteria. The first research question describes this exploration, emphasizing how various stakeholders describe influencers who would have the most impact on the brand-customer relationship:

*RQ1: What criteria would make an influencer suitable to be the brand-customer connector in terms of being a strong opinion leader and creating virtual intimacy?*

### **Public participatory culture empowered by social media platforms**

Ever since the introduction of the Internet, resulting in the emergence of new online platforms for public discourse, civic engagement scholars have engaged in discussions about the potential of promoting public participatory culture through what is considered the evolution of Habermas' (1962) public sphere. The second wave of Internet innovation with the worldwide explosion of social networks brings about a new idea of 'user-centred innovation' (von Hippel 2005), which places the public audience in the control position of communicative power relations. Audiences as consumers, empowered by the openness of social media, are capable of challenging the traditional one-way control of media production and dissemination for commercial purposes and actively sharing their own perspectives and opinions. (Loader & Mercea, 2011). This newly gained power allows individual and group audiences to become the potential source of new innovations and ideas for more democratic approaches (Leadbeater, 2008) such as two-way communications and participatory consumer culture in the corporate sphere.



## **The excellence theory**

Grunig et al. (1992) established the excellence theory to describe the ideal practices of public relations activities as a strategic management function in an organization. The theory proposed excellence in public relations as a means of giving voice to and empowering publics in the decision-making process of an organization, in order to build quality and long-term relationships with strategic stakeholders.

The public is an extremely important theoretical concept of public relations that was integrated into the excellence theory. Distinctive from the concept of a market in marketing, publics are groups of people who relate to an organization, tend to make “issues” out of “problems” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), organize themselves around problems, and seek out organizations that create the problem.

### **Two-way communication models**

Grunig and Hunt (1984) were the first to identify four models of public relations, known as the four typical ways of conceptualizing and conducting communication functions, which proposed two-way communication models as the excellence practice of communications. The four models include press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical model. These four models were then included in the excellence theory by Grunig et al. (1992) in the discussion of the ideal practices for excellent public relations in organizations.

The press agency and public information are both one-way communication models, which focus on disseminating information about the organization to the media and the publics and not seeking or receiving information from the publics. These models are considered propagandistic (Grunig et al., 1995), emphasizing only the media attention over the publics’ need to publish information to advantage and favor the organization.

On the other hand, the other two models reflect the two-way communication approach, where research is conducted to provide publics with insights and feedback that are used to fuel organizations' communication strategy. In both models, research is used as a form of two-way communication, to seek information from the publics to facilitate understanding and communication. However, the key goal of the two-way asymmetrical model is to create an effective message to motivate and persuade the publics to the goal of the organization, while for the two-way symmetrical, the goal is mutual understanding and conflict management through negotiations and compromises (Grunig, 2013).

Grunig and Grunig (1992) argued that the two-way symmetrical model should be the normative model for public relations, representing the excellent practices of public relations to achieve organizational effectiveness. Aiming toward a balance between the organizations and publics' interests, this model is considered more ethical and socially responsible than other models.

### **Organizational public engagement**

In line with the suggestion of the excellence theory on the practice of two-way communications in public relations, public engagement was introduced as a new paradigm of organizational endeavor to connect, interact, and communicate with their publics, through collaboration, deliberation, and participation (Elderman, 2008). Scholars have emphasized the importance of public engagement in building sustainable organization–public relationships (OPRs) (Hon & Grunig, 1999). By enhancing OPRs, organizations can cultivate and encourage supportive behaviors and positive attitudes from their publics, as well as build up their reputations (Grunig et al., 2002; Hong & Yang, 2009; Yang, 2007). Publics engagement is

generally defined as an organization's endeavor to involve the publics in the decision-making process or operational activities (Bruce & Shelley, 2010).

As suggested by Grunig (1992), in order for a corporation to operate excellently, public relations must be considered the highest-level management function. In combination with the public engagement approach, this would place the public, no longer as just customers, targets of marketing and selling efforts, but also as active contributors, whose voices are heard and considered by companies. On the other end, companies should no longer focus only on selling their products and getting the key selling messages into the customer's heads, but also taking into consideration customers' feedback, wishes, and demands, in order to enhance their business and products to better serve the customers. This also aligns with the civic engagement effort in the political segment and audience engagement in the journalism segment, to promote democracy in modern society.

Other major public relations researchers have also articulated the role of publics dialogic engagement for business (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Heath, 2006). The concept of dialogic propinquity is defined as "publics are consulted in matters that influence them, and for publics, it means that they are willing and able to articulate their demands to organizations" (p. 26). The dialogic paradigm marks a theoretical shift from the idea of symmetrical two-way communication, emphasizing managing publics and public opinion, to a new focus on building, nurturing, and maintaining relationships (Kent & Taylor, 2014). As an established theory of ethics, dialogue theory proposed that "organizations should engage with stakeholders and publics to make things happen, to help make better decisions, to keep citizens informed, and to strengthen organizations and society" (p. 388).

Since these were ideal concepts and models created theoretically to guide professional practices, their pragmatic implications need to be explored. The current study seeks to examine this normative approach of two-way, dialogic communication within the PR industry, in real-world situations of working with influencers. As suggested by previous studies, audience trust and influencer credibility are essential factors to cultivate dialogic conversation with the audiences. To build the audience perception of objectivity and credibility, shifting toward the non-paid capacity of brand-influencer partnership is a rational solution. Therefore, a research question is generated which focuses on capturing professional opinions regarding the feasibility of working with key opinion leaders (KOLs) in a non-commercial, cooperative approach.

*RQ2: What would be the practical challenges of working with KOLs in a non-commercial, cooperating manner to facilitate two-way communication with their audiences?*

Finally, this study also explored the role of the influencer in this two-way communication model. As the mediator of the brand-consumer connection, the third research question focuses on the influencer and their experiences with this practice.

*RQ3: What would be the main concerns of influencers on practicing this audience-participatory approach?*

## **Methodology**

The research is conducted using in-depth interviews as the main methodology to examine current industry practices, experiences, and expectations for a new approach to working with influencers. The purpose of this study is to explore the motivations behind the normative ideology of two-way communications and code of conducts for influencer tactics. Then, from the insights of the findings, the study proposes practical solutions for coping with it. Interview is suggested by Hopf (2004) as an efficient methodology for “imparting of expert knowledge about

the research field in question; the recording and analysis of the informants’ subjective perspectives; and/or the collection of data relating to their biography” (p. 203). With its capability of capturing and evaluating professional experiences and contextual interactions, this methodology is particularly appropriate for this study. It is expected to encourage open articulations on situational meanings or motives for actions or deprive self-interpretations of related theories of strategic communications.

Three groups of two to three participants were interviewed, with each group representing the stakeholder groups listed in Table 1, including PR practitioners, organizational PR departments, and influencers. The interviewees were asked about their professional experiences and opinions related to this new approach, and their ideas of effective tactics for brand communications through influencers (see Appendix A, B, C for interview guides). The common themes and insights from their answers provide valuable insight into the PR industry, and the findings work to inform suggestions for working with influencers in strategic ways that encourage participatory culture and audience engagement with brands.

<b>Expertise representation</b>	<b>Interview profile</b>
PR practitioners 1	Female, 30 years old PR manager at an international PR agency, 6 years of experience working for the account of a big global technology company in Vietnam
PR practitioners 2	Female, 39 years old A PR Director who worked at multiple agencies in Vietnam with 10 years of experience working for clients from diverse industries and sectors
PR practitioners 3	Female, 30 years old PR manager at a global PR agency in the US with 7 years of experience working for clients from diverse industries and sectors, specializes in the influencer and social media spaces

Brand Communications Manager 1	Female, 38 years old 5 years of experience as a Communications Manager at the APAC headquarter of a big global technology company, in charge of the Vietnam market.
Brand Communications Manager 2	Female, 34 years old Project Communications Officer at a well-known global non-profit organization of wildlife conservation, Vietnam office
Brand Communications Manager 3	Female, 45 years old Marketing Communications Manager with 14 years working at a US non-profit organization financed and directed by the dairy industry
Influencer 1	Male, 35 years old 1.5M subscribers Vietnamese lifestyle and entertainment YouTuber with 4.8M Tik Tok followers
Influencer 2	Male, 31 years old 5M subscribers Vietnamese lifestyle YouTuber

**Table 1.** List of interviewees

The interviewees were selected using convenience sampling, drawing on the personal and professional network of the researcher. Convenience sampling method is commonly used in qualitative communication research (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). Although this sampling technique might lead to limitation in generalizability, Koerber and McMichael argued that it could guarantee a richness of data over less convenience sample. Grunig et al. (1995) used this method in their investigation of the models of public relations in cross-cultural context. For this research, convenience sampling was a good fit as it looked into a specific practice of the industry that would require relevant experience. Additionally, PR professionals are cautious of participating in interviews as they do not want their answers to be associated with their organizations or cause risks of reputational damages to the brands they work for. Hence, a connection with the researcher would increase their confident, the likeliness to participate and increase the richness of acquired information.

A list of potential participants was created with the information of PR professionals matching the requirements of the research. The potential participants are identified based on criteria specified for each group. For PR practitioners, they have to be at the manager level with over a minimum of 5 years of experience overseeing client relationship and influencers partnerships. For influencers, they have to own a YouTube channel with over 500k subscribers. For brand managers in Vietnam, they need to have over five years of experience working at a specific global brand. After that, an invitation of research participation email was sent to potential participants, with a Debriefing Statement that include information and descriptions of the research project and the researcher (See Appendix D for Debriefing Statement). Participants who agreed to participate in the interview then received a confirmation of being selected to participate through follow-up emails and scheduled interviews.

For systematical and trustworthy analysis of the data, the current study adopts the thematic analysis framework by Nowell et al. (2017). The step-by-step procedure designed to meet the trustworthiness criteria for qualitative studies was adopted to extract the dominant themes from the responses of the interviewees. The audio records were transcribed, then carefully reviewed and coded. The coding process aimed to simplify and systematically structure the data to organize and examine its meanings and characteristics. After all the data had been coded, themes were extracted from the identified list of codes, then the themes were reviewed, refined, and named. These themes were finally defined and incorporated into the discussions and the construction of a conceptual framework, in combination with the suggestions from the literature or in a way that inform the practices proposed by the framework.

## **Findings**

The in-depth interviews allowed for a deep understanding of the professional experiences of working with influencers from three different public relations' perspectives. Using the thematic analysis framework, the current study was able to identify four themes: (1) Organizational philosophy behind commercial restrictions (2) Win-win orientation; (3) Fit comes first; (4) Current potentials of two-way communications. The next section is dedicated to defining and elaborating on these four themes.

The discussion of findings drawn from in-depth interviews with industry experts is reported in the format of a conceptual framework. Findings and insights from the answers were systematically reflected in the concepts and constructs of the communication theories proposed by the literature. In general, the findings contribute significant ideas from the aspect that was less concerned by the academic research of communications that indicated potential for future research and application of the proposed public participatory framework for strategic communication via influencers.

### **Newly emerged organizational philosophy behind commercial restrictions in influencer partnerships**

To explore more about the idea behind the commercial restriction in influencer PR presented in the background introduction of this paper, the research interview included PR professionals from the internal PR team of two organizations practicing this restriction. One of the two organizations is a non-profit organization; therefore, they believe it would make no sense to pay influencers to endorse community-beneficial causes. In addition, this organization argues that the messages they send out in their campaigns are mostly for the educational purpose of encouraging certain actions. However, these messages are mostly relative and might depend on



the receiver's perspectives and contextual opinions. Therefore, if the influencers endorse these messages in the motivation of commercial contracts, to influence their audiences to take action without believing in the cause and meaning of the action, moral conduct might be compromised.

The other organization is a technology company with products that are available for public use. Their business ecosystem involves both free and monetizing products. The commercial restriction that prevents working with influencers under any commercial contractual agreements was said to be rooted in the corporation's philosophy of conviction. The organization views PR activity not as an act of using media to promote their products or services, but as means of recognition for their contribution to society. Hence, the job of their PR department is to inform, inspire, and articulate the values, visions, and contributions of their brand and products to the community to earn organic publicity.

We would want to position ourself as a humble brand. And we don't talk about ourselves. So, we have to let an influencer speak on behalf of us. And we believe that they should advocate for the brand because they share a genuine interest in our goals and vision, instead of associating with our brand because we pay them. And that's why our selection of influencers to work with is really niche.

(Brand Communications Manager 1)

These two organizations represent two distinctive approaches to the non-paid organic PR practice that exists in the industry. Further research is needed to paint a bigger picture of this practice. Within the scope of this paper, the findings suggest that organization characteristics and philosophy might contribute to their tendency to practice certain commercial restrictions for PR activities.

## **Win-win orientation**

The second theme describes the practical way of working with influencers in a non-paid capacity. Non-paid partnerships are common in the PRs industry, taking multiple forms from earned media coverage to non-commercial agreements. The win-win orientation theme represents the approach taken by PR experts and influencers in the process of making a non-commercial deal. The interviewed PR managers from both agencies and brands shared their acknowledgment of the influencer's legitimate demand for some forms of compensation in partnerships with brands in PR campaigns.

They also acknowledge that influencers' interests lie in values beyond money, such as fame and opportunities to build personal branding. Non-commercial partnership in exchange for the opportunity to build personal image is considered a long-term investment by many influencers. A PR manager with ten years of experience working with influencers for brands and agencies shared that:

Because very few celebrities and influencers can create by themselves stunning activities that are creative and big enough to build up or strengthen their images. Only agencies/brands can offer celebrities the chance to make something interesting that can attract their audiences successfully.

(PR Practitioner 2)

Non-paid partnerships, especially when it comes to big brands or major projects with significant meanings to the community, are seen as opportunities for influencers to build up their personal branding. Especially if they got their name associated with big brands and global organizations, it would potentially be followed by massive publicity and free PR on media channels. These partnerships might also generate exclusive experiences for content opportunities

as mentioned in the previous section, or create chances for the influencers to interact with their audiences. These personal branding improvements, in turn, are believed to have the capability to generate more commercial contracts and opportunities in the future. Influencers are now really careful in selecting brands and campaigns to cooperate with, both paid and non-paid. Hence, the influencers' brand/campaign selection process would be a vital touch point to making a win-win proposal.

One successful lifestyle influencer included in this study shared that whenever he made a decision on a non-paid partnership, he always considered the win-win values from two aspects, the opportunity to learn something new, and the network that he might acquire through the partnership. He would also consider its benefit for the community and his followers, in addition to the opportunities that might follow it, such as the network and branding developments from the non-paid partnership.

I can earn money through many other opportunities in my life. There have been times when I participated in a brand partnership without being paid but after that, a lot of brands or the other partners, they approached me because of my spirit. So I may say that is the reason why I sometimes consider working with brands in a non-paid capacity, firstly is for the sake of the community, but secondly because other opportunities will come later.

(Influencer 1)

### **Fit comes first**

The third theme that emerged among the interviewees' responses on influencer/brand selection criteria. All three groups mentioned fit as their first and foremost criteria, even for

brands and agencies looking for influencers to cooperate in their campaigns, or influencers considering brand partnerships.

Brand-influencer fit is universally understood as the general relevancy, matching characteristics between the brand, products, or services. Studies in marketing and strategic communication have long examined the role of brand-influencer fit in effective campaigns from multiple aspects, including attractiveness (Kamins, 1990), expertise (Till and Busler, 1998), personalities (Mishra et al, 2015), and shared values (Choi et al., 2005). The majority of literature on brand-influencer fit agreed that a good fit has positive effects on consumers' attitudes as well as influencers' trustworthiness and credibility (Janssen et al., 2021; Kamins & Gupta, 1994).

In line with this literature, the interviews revealed that fit was a highly prioritized criterion in a decision of forming a brand-influencer partnership, whether it is paid or non-paid. Aside from creating positive effects on the consumers and general success of the campaigns as presented in the literature, the PR professionals believed that a good fit would also guarantee a more efficient partnership.

Two common practices in the selection process to increase brand-influencer fit were mentioned in the interview responses: using tool stack and through long-term engagement. PR experts from agencies shared that they have been using tool stacks and databases to filter and make short lists of influencers for PR campaigns.

It's a mixture between an art and a science, of qualitative and quantitative measures. To determine who is actually fit for a campaign, we look at various metrics. Have they posted about this brand before have they posted about a similar product? Have they posted about any of our competitors? Have they posted anything negative about the brand

before? We also look at things like where their audiences are located and their percentage of real followers.

(PR Practitioner 3)

On the other end, for influencers, brand fit in partnerships is considered in the best interest of their audiences. The audiences are the influencers' clients and also their most valuable assets. Therefore, it is critical for influencers to make sure their brand partnerships are not only benefiting them in terms of commercial values but also need to benefit their audiences in terms of relevancy and helpfulness. Influencer has no longer been considered as a short-term career, hence, in order to develop their channels and career sustainably, influencers are adopting a meticulous practice of screening and selecting brand partnerships, including a variety of criteria like the relevancy to their target audiences, the product/service quality, the brand's reputation, and shared values.

Usually before endorsing for a certain brand, I will have to take an initial step of checking the product quality. I will see if the product has a good fit with me and my content direction, or if their target audiences match my audiences. Because in fact, viewers care about what interests the influencers have, what information they share, whether it is useful to them or not. If an influencer doesn't provide useful information to the audience, then he certainly won't be able to expand his pool of audiences.

(Influencer 2)

### **Current potentials of two-way communications**

Another prominent theme that emerged from the interview findings was influencers' willingness to become the mediator between the brand they worked with and their audiences. The interviewed influencers both indicated that reading through all the comments and feedback

from the audiences was a part of their daily job, not only for the brand-related content. Especially with the development of new social media platforms, e.g., Tik Tok, that allow new forms of active interaction from the audience to the media figure, e.g., the duet function, the audience's voice is no longer one of hundreds and thousands of lines of comment under an influencers' post but is now able to gain its own publicity and become more meaningful than ever. With all of these newly earned powers of the audiences, the influencers have to be more careful in terms of selecting brands to work with and more proactive in interacting and addressing the audiences' questions and feedback.

Both interviewed influencers suggested that whenever they found questions, negative comments, or constructive feedback from their audiences on the brand or product they were endorsing, they would be willing to address that to the brand team or agency team to get the information and follow up with their audiences. By doing so, they were performing their responsibility toward their audiences to gain their trust and improve credibility.

So whenever I upload something, I always set out some times in one day to read through the comments, for taking notes, all the things and for a modify my future content. I have to read and I have to listen to my audience a lot and I need to learn from that too. For some comments that really want to listen from you and really want to contribute to the quality of the product, I will ask the brand or the agency for the feedback and gets back to my audiences.

(Influencer 1)

On the agency side, the PR experts agreed that collecting the audiences' feedback and comments and capturing them in the client reports is a universal industry practice. These data were also used for research and analytics to better communicate with the audiences. However, as

an agency, their concerns were limited only to the project reports and outcomes. On the other hand, brand PR teams to some certain extent, are more concerned about responding to those questions and feedback. They would be willing to address questions and correct misunderstandings about their products and services. Nevertheless, for constructive comments about the product quality or functions, the process of actually taking them into consideration to actually improve the products or services is not as efficient. The process usually goes as far as communicating with internal product teams about the public's narratives, without any further following up.

Based on these insights and findings derived from the interviews, the next section goes further into discussions and includes practical applications for the public relations industry. These themes are combined with the implications from previous research to propose pragmatic practices for a new approach to influencer cooperation in strategic communications.

## **Discussion and Conceptual Framework**

As suggested by the literature, social media influencers, YouTubers in particular, have become powerful communication tools for brands and organizations. These brand ambassadors establish their influence and persuasion on the targeted publics in order to positively impact business goals. Adopting the idea of excellent practices of corporate communications and incorporating the findings from the in-depth interview, this study comes to proposing a framework for involving YouTubers in PR activities as facilitators to host a forum for organizational public engagement, promoting public participatory culture in the business sector, in line with the democratic approach. The framework is developed as the result of the study, to systematically demonstrate the implications of the research findings in a practical context. This practice addresses the moral dissonance of the practitioners both from brands and agencies in

using commercial values to motivate influencers to manipulate their audiences, which consequently leads to a corrosion of trust.

### **Find a balance in the non-commercial partnership approach**

The major idea of this approach is the shift in the YouTuber's role, from a brand endorser to a facilitator of audience deliberation. In traditional practices, YouTubers are paid to promote the brand and their products through personal sharings and experiences. The influencers are expected to deliver the key message predefined by the brand, in order to boost sales, raise product awareness, or increase brand trust and reputation. Research has been suggesting that the practice of commercial partnership between brands and influencers has a negative effect on consumers' attitudes, awareness, and behaviors toward both the brand and the influencers (Boerman, 2020; Boerman et al., 2017; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Kim et al., 2021; Martínez-López et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020).

This study found similar opinions from the agency side. Industry experts suggested that celebrities and influencers who worked for campaigns were not considered one of the communication strategies, but purely as paid media. And just like other forms of paid media, like advertorials or ads, cannot build trust with the target audiences. Another concern about the paid capacity came from the way the influencer deliver their message. PR professionals shared the same opinion that money can be so tempting that sometimes authenticity is compromised. Influencers might take a job to endorse a brand or a product because they like the money, rather than because they really appreciate the product's quality, or share the same values with the brand or project.

Nonetheless, an ethnographic study by Archer and Harrigan (2016) challenged the normative theory of public relations. The findings of their study indicated that despite the effort



of communication research in academia to propose the normative theories of dialogic, two-way communications to guide the practitioners, practitioners in general, prefer a more realistic approach. Relationships between the PR practitioners and influencers were more likely to fall into the commercial capacity, with incentives or payments for every endorsement of a brand or organization. The authors end their discussions with an argument that money and other forms of commercial payments should be the grease for 'dialogue' and relationship building between PR practitioners and influencers. This commercial nature of relationships should also be taken into consideration in the practical application of normative theories.

In line with this idea, a prominent theme emerged from the finding of the interviews, which is the role of commercial values in long-term relationship building with influencers. All of the industry experts included in the interview shared the point of view that it is a reasonable and legitimate demand of the influencers be paid to endorse the brand or products. They understand that it is the influencers' main income and tokens of compensation show respect for the influencers' works and investment of time and efforts.

Even though this framework is heading toward a non-paid orientation against the common practice of the industry, it needs to be clearly understood that a win-win mindset is the key to making this possible. The PR practitioners need to understand the pain point of the influencers and address it in the dealing process, in order to land a partnership that is not based on commercial values, yet still be for the interest of both parties.

For agencies and organizations that do not have specific restrictions on working with influencers in a paid capacity. Commercial contracts might be offered alternatively with the non-paid partnerships as the fuel to keep the relationship burning. For organizations with stricter

commercial restrictions, compensations can also come in various forms, instead of a serious commercial contract, such as products, services, or exclusive opportunities for experience.

Additionally, most of the interviewed professionals mentioned the idea that relationship-building with influencers was most effective as a long-term effort. Through long-term engagement, PR professionals might learn about an influencer's references, their characteristics, if they are the right fits for the brand and campaigns, their working style, and their commercial/non-commercial orientation. Long-term relationships are also the key to non-commercial partnerships as the long-term benefits are accounted for and future chances of compensation are allowed.

### **Influencers as a facilitator of public deliberation to mediate two-way communications**

The new approach places influencers in the neutral position of a field expert, to facilitate the conversation between the brand and their publics. The main function of the influencers in this approach should include initiating and encouraging audience participation in the brand engagement conversation, taking the audience's comments and feedback about the brand and products, and providing information to correct misunderstandings, and false information on the brand/product and the issue in general, verify the information given by the brand and giving authentic, unbiased reviews. This approach focuses on establishing the deliberation platform between the brand and the public, through YouTube influencers as media personas whom the audiences trust and feel more open to engaging in a conversation.

### **The advantages of the YouTube platform**

As the findings suggested, it is not a new concept for influencers for taking their place as the mediator between their audiences and the brand they were cooperating with, instead, they

have been doing this task for their own sake and benefit for a while, as a part of new developments of the digital era. Nonetheless, the current conversation remains limited, as most audiences do not think of common advertorial content on influencer channels as an opportunity for two-way communication with the brand. Therefore, a specialized format as proposed for the framework is necessary to stimulate and cultivate audience-brand conversations via influencer channels.

YouTube has specific advantages as a platform that make it more suitable for this framework. As the literature suggests, YouTube enables multiple levels of interaction between the media persona and their audiences, not only as a social media platform but also as a video content platform (Ferchaud et al., 2018). The video format allows longer exposure between the media persona and the audience since the length of a video can vary from a few minutes to a few hours. Media personas can create a deeper conversation via videos since it is easier for people to watch and listen than to read a really long post on other platforms like Facebook.

In addition, as virtual intimacy is considered a vital aspect of influencers on their audiences, which would potentially stimulate more genuine and meaningful interactions and feedback for the brands or products endorsed by the influencers, YouTube would be a sufficient environment to cultivate that. The parasocial theory suggested YouTube like other traditional video media has the ability to trigger one-way affection from the audiences toward the media persona. YouTube can even create a stronger effect by its ability to better imitate the sense of direct mutual conversations, with the media persona looking directly into the camera and interacting with the audience (Ferchaud et al., 2018). On YouTube, conversations can be conducted via a variety of formats, from casual vlogs to discuss the brand and product, talkshow with field experts or the brand spokesperson, or live-stream to maximize interactivity.

## **Influencer selection criteria**

Due to particular functions and requirements, influencers that work as facilitators for brand-public conversations should be selected using a set of criteria suggested by the literature to be effective and credible. Considering from the influencer-audience aspect to maximize the influencing capacity, vital characteristics of participatory creators are divided into two major aspects: credibility as an opinion leader, and the ability to win the heart of the audiences.

To be a successful opinion leader, perceived as credible by the audience, the influencer needs to have public-recognized expertise, strong personal branding, and high trustworthiness (McGinnies & Ward, 1980; Reichelt et al., 2014). Influencers are perceived as experts in certain fields when they are able to share in-depth knowledge and understanding, professional information, or experience-driven insights of the subject that help their audiences learn and inform their decisions. This perceived expertise is often backed by the creators' academic achievement or professional position. Hence, strong personal branding is required as the next criterion. The influencer has to be able to differentiate themselves from others with unique selling points, created by their personal imprints and charisma. Personal branding refers to the distinctive public image developed by individuals for commercial gain and/or cultural capital' (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017), which not only includes their signature characteristics but also their background and expertise.

Trustworthiness is perhaps the most important factor that contributes to the influencer's credibility (McGinnies & Ward, 1980; Reichelt et al., 2014). The influencer that can facilitate public deliberations needs to be perceived as truthful, and non-bias, without any effort of deception or manipulation. To assure this criterion, potential candidates should be background-checked for any controversial incident, scandal, or criticism that might damage their credibility.

To cultivate the audience's positive affection, possibly through parasocial interaction and relationships, authenticity, realism, and relatability are the three important drivers (Ferchaud et al., 2018). Authenticity refers to the perception of the audience about the influencer being true to themselves, to their real-life person, and to true characteristics. Realism refers to the perception of the stories shared by the influencer about their lives, and the situations that they encountered which bring up their personalities. Relatability refers to the influencer's friendliness and openness which could make the audiences feel comfortable as if they are listening to a friend. Relatability is a critical factor that makes influencers different from traditional celebrities or experts.

In addition to those factors, the findings of this study suggest that fit is always the top-of-mind criteria when an agency or a brand makes a decision on an influencer to cooperate, and vice versa when an influencer decides whether to work with a brand or not. By approaching influencers with a good fit to the brands and products, they could increase the chance of sealing an organic, non-paid partnership, and have a stronger, more powerful message and content created for the campaign. Fit functions as a broader umbrella that covers other criteria such as expertise and relatability while backing up other criteria like authenticity and trustworthiness.

A critical implication of the role of brand-influencer fit for the proposed framework is that it can be leveraged to increase persuasion when making the deal with influencers in a non-paid capacity. Materials and talking points to present the idea to the influencers should be tailored in a way that emphasizes the fit between the influencer and the brand or product/service to make them appear more appealing and compelling. Perception of a good fit might become a motivation for the influencers to consider the partnership without commercial benefits.

Literature on strategic communication tactics using influencers has also emphasized the factor of the number of followers. The majority of previous studies found that influencers with a higher number of followers indicate higher popularity and likability (De Veirman et al., 2017). However, research findings on the effect of influencer audience size in strategic communication have not always been consistent. Kay et al. (2019) and Djafarova & Rushworth (2016) suggested that micro-influencers were more effective in driving consumer outcomes, such as purchase intentions, in comparison to the macro-influencers, as well as more influential, as they were perceived as more credible and relatable.

PR professionals interviewed in the current study shared the same idea as they indicated that micro-influencer might sometimes be more efficient and deliberate in delivering the message. They were also more likely to spend time interacting with their audiences, build stronger bonds with their audiences, and put more effort into connecting the brand and the audiences by monitoring and responding to every question and feedback. In terms of relationship building, the PR professionals mentioned that the brand might benefit from investing in long-term relationships with the micro-influencers, especially in the non-paid capacity. Micro-influencers are on their path to building their image and publicity and would be more open to partnership opportunities with major brands. Brand-influencer relationships are easier to form at the micro-level phase, then could be maintained and developed as the publicity of the influencers grow and move to an upper-scale level. In long run, these types of relationships would be beneficial for the brand as the influencers have better relationships and mutual understanding of the brand, and thus are more likely to advocate for them.

In conclusion, an influencer's audience size should be an additional consideration. It depends on the objectives, and brand situation, and can be flexibly planned with a priority on brand and campaign fit.

### **Additional requirements of conceptual framework**

Aside from the influencer selection criteria, in order to successfully apply this framework to establishing brand-public conversations, additional aspects also need to be carefully considered, including transparency, objectivity, risk management efforts, and follow-up process. Research suggested that the disclosure of brand-influencer relationships can actually mediate positive attitudes from the audiences through persuasion knowledge activation (Beckert et al., 2021). Hence, the organization can consider aligning with the influencer to be transparent about their collaborative relationship to increase the audience's trust. It is also important that the influencer take a neutral stand in the conversation, not showing any biased attitudes toward the brand and products. The influencer must be able to give critical opinions, honest reviews, and evaluations, addressing the flaws and weaknesses of the brand and its products.

However, it doesn't mean that the brand should take all risks to have negative information spreading that could damage its reputation without any controls. Risk management measures should be taken as precautions, at the beginning of the working process with the YouTube influencer. Brand communication specialists need to meet up and engage in a conversation with the influencer to learn about their narratives and opinions toward the brand and products, align on what they plan to share or how they would call their audience to engage in the conversation with the brand, correct the wrong information, or any misunderstanding, and addressing sensitive issues. The purpose of this initial conversation is not to tell the influencer what to say, but rather to be aware of what they want to say and provide them with honest,

accurate, intimate information. During the talk, the communication specialist also needs to make sure that the influencer is clear on the objectives of the conversation, as well as be conscious to not let the public deliberation take a wrong turn to an irrelevant topic that might be out of their expertise.

After the conversation with the public, the follow-up process is crucial in order to create long-term, meaningful impacts and reinforce the public brand trust. The comment and feedback from the audiences need to be taken into consideration during the brand's research and development, as well as the decision-making process. Consumer questions need to be responded to carefully and thoroughly. Whenever a brand's action or operating decision is made based on the information from these public engagement conversations, there should be a remark in the announcement so that the public is aware that their voices are actually heard.

### **Benefits of the framework**

Acknowledging the undeniable role of the paid capacity in relationship building with the influencers, this framework could benefit as an interchanging tactic between the paid contracts, or a touch point to be implemented prior to or after a campaign to collect consumers' feedback. The big idea and key advantage brought by this framework are that it is capable of cultivating, stimulating, and encouraging dialogic conversation between the brand and the audiences in a more efficient way, utilizing the established parasocial relationships and credibility of the influencers.

### **For the organization**

As suggested by the literature, this public conversation framework can cultivate the OPRs, improving brand trust and credibility by respecting the customers and aiming to better serve them. By establishing and maintaining two-way communications, the framework can



become a measure to develop sustainable OPRs. This kind of conversation also creates an opportunity to directly address and clear the negative rumors and myths about the brand on a public platform. Customer insights, often seen as valuable assets to brands and companies, can be collected through these conversations to inform the brand and product development. Through influencers, the brand can also reach a pool of potential customers and increase brand recognition and customer awareness of brand values, vision, and mission, which can rarely be brought up in normal contexts. Finally, promoting public participation can help build brand loyalty by letting the public be involved in operating decisions. For instance, corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaign would be more effective and has more valuable meaning if informed by the demands and actual situation of the local community, which is suggested by the community members themselves.

### **For the influencers**

As suggested by the literature and insights from the interview findings, commercial partnerships have been found to damage audiences' trust and positive attitudes toward the influencers to a certain extent. Nonetheless, commercial contracts are the influencer's main income. It is a vital question for the influencers trying to balance between the needs for money and the demand of their audiences, between what the brand wants and the benefits for their audiences, in order to develop sustainably.

On the other hand, influencers are also looking to become more responsible with their content and their audiences as the development of new platforms and new generations of audiences create higher standards and requirements. To cope with these new set of standards, the influencers need to invest more efforts and time in brand partnerships to select the right brand and project that are relevant and beneficial to their images and audiences, to design the content

that meets the requirement of both the clients and the audiences, and to monitor the feedback and comments to control the narrative and proactively listen to their audiences.

This proposed framework provides the influencers an approach to brand partnership in a consideration of all these requirements. Furthermore, this practice could be compensation for the audiences, a demonstration of the influencer's responsibility over commercial partnerships. By practicing this format of participatory culture, the influencers might claim their position not as a paid channel, a spoken media for the brand to say what they want, but also stand for the audience to have their voices heard by the brand and create actual impacts.

### **For the publics/consumers**

Audience-brand conversation has been a neglected topic in strategic communication literature. Aside from major collective actions against brands such as boycotts, protests, or social media movements, audience voice on a casual daily basis has not received enough attention from the brand, the media, and scholars. As suggested by the conceptualization of participatory culture, public discourse, and deliberate need for a platform and an environment that encourages reciprocal conversation and interaction to happen, instead of just a one-way channel (Carpini et al., 2004; Gibson, 2006). Hence, the author argues that it is not enough for brands to establish online channels to receive comments and feedback from consumers, while the proposed framework was designed as a participatory platform for better deliberation to stimulate dialogic conversations between brands and consumers.

The framework positions influencers as the facilitator of a two-way conversation between the public audiences and brands. On one side, they are in partnership with the brand, with established relationships and conversations built upon mutual understanding and respect, which gives them more influential power to add more weight to the comments and feedback on the

products/services. In other words, audiences' voices might be amplified through influencers to have more call-to-action value to the brands. On the other side, the audiences might feel more open and comfortable discussing with their favorite influencers about a brand than directly with the brand itself, once they perceive the influencers as a third-party, neutral facilitator. This tendency to dialogue is empowered by parasocial reactions and relationships, as well as the influencers' established credibility as opinion leaders.

### **Framework challenges**

This framework is developed from the theoretical foundation of the excellence theory, an ideal practice of public relations, hence, also involves risks and limitations in practical application. The foremost condition for this framework to work is that the company needs to be open to customer feedback, ready to change for the better, and honestly accept its weaknesses. The most challenging part of this framework is that it largely depends on building a relationship with the influencer, while the current practice with paid contracts is definitely much easier to secure and control.

In order to uphold objectivity, it is unavoidable to mention the sensitive subjects, the negative information that brands usually prefer not to address publicly. Handling those kinds of information is like dealing with Pandora's box, which requires advanced skill and expertise to not worsen the situation by spreading negative information that might lead to a crisis. This is especially challenging when it has to depend completely on the influencer as the moderator. Hence, thorough consideration of which influencer to work with is extremely important.

## **Conclusion**

### **Theoretical implications and future research**

By examining the public participatory approach of two-way communication in strategic influencer communication, the current study contributes to the empirical values and practical implications of Grunig et al. (1992)'s Excellence theory, as well as other theories and concepts in line with it, e.g., the OPRs concept and Kent & Taylor (2002)'s dialogic engagement principles. The findings add empirical perspectives to balance between the normative suggestions of these theories and the demands of industry practices. Another theoretical implication presented by this study is the potential role of influencers as the mediator of the brand-audience two-way conversation. This approach has not received adequate attentions by researcher of strategic influencer communication. Future research might focus on exploring this direction by looking into the audience feedback management practices from the brand, agency, or influencer aspects. An important direction for future research that would significantly contribute to this approach is the audiences' tendency to communicate with the brand via their favorite influencers.

In terms of influencer selection for organization strategic communications, the current study emphasizes the role of brand-influencer fit as a highly appreciated and prioritized factor by professional practitioners. Future research might examine further into the industry practices of increasing fit in the selection process, or investigate the effect of a good fit on audiences' perception and behaviors.

### **Limitations**

This study acknowledges a significant limitation in sample size and sample selection. As the study investigated the insights from three different groups of stakeholders, which included two to three participants per group, the sample population for each group is limited.

Additionally, the study used a convenience sampling method; this method, while useful in carrying out timely research in public relations, carries the potential of bias in the research process as most of the interviewees have a personal connection with the researcher. The absence of a more geographically diverse influencer participant pool is another limitation of the sample selection process.

## **Conclusion**

As presented in the previous sections, this study explored the experiences of public relations professionals and influencers in order to better understand the new and emerging two-way methods of business and communication. Reflective of the literature, the findings suggest a new approach to practicing influencer strategic communication tactics that demonstrates normative respect for all sides of the brand-influencer-audience relationship. This practice addresses the moral dissonance of the practitioners both from brands and agencies in using commercial values to motivate influencers to manipulate their audiences, which consequently leads to a corrosion of trust. The insights from the professionals' interviews not only provide meaningful managerial implications to the practice of PRs in Vietnam, but also present potential ideas for future research of strategic influencer communications.

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## Appendix A - Interview Protocol, Agency

1. Have you ever had a client who requires organic (non-paid) media/influencer pitching instead of using commonly paid contracts? If you have, can you briefly describe the situation and the client's requirements? *(If yes, go to question 2. If no, go to question 3)*
2. If you have, please provide more information about the situation:
  1. How did you meet that requirement?
  2. What challenges or obstacles did you have to face?
  3. How do you feel about that requirement and the job that you did?
3. If you have not, please indicate:
  1. Your thoughts on the idea? Do you think it is a good idea or it is possible?
  2. What would you do to cope with the requirement if your client requested that?
4. How effective do you evaluate your past strategic communication tactics that involve influencers? What are some advantages and disadvantages?
5. To what extent do you think organic influencer pitching using genuine relationship building might benefit the brand?
6. How do you define successful influencer cooperation?
7. What are the criteria you would consider when selecting influencers to cooperate?
8. What would be the practical challenges of working with KOLs in a non-commercial, cooperating manner?

## **Appendix B - Interview Protocol #2, Brand**

1. Does your organization have any restrictions on working with influencers for PR or CSR campaigns?
2. How do you agree with the idea that influencers should be advocating for brands/organizations because they share a genuine interest in goals and visions, instead of because they are paid to do so?
3. How effective do you evaluate your past strategic communication tactics that involve influencers? What are some advantages and disadvantages?
4. To what extent do you think organic influencer pitching using genuine relationship building might benefit the brand?
5. How do you define successful influencer cooperation?
6. What are the criteria you would consider when selecting influencers to cooperate?

## Appendix C - Interview Protocol #3, Influencer

1. Have you ever used your influence to advocate for a brand/organization's because you genuinely appreciate its values, visions, or product quality?
2. Would you cooperate with a brand/organization to promote and support the communications of a PR initiative that you think is relevant and meaningful for your audiences without being paid? Why and why not?
3. Do you often monitor your audience's feedback on your PR/promotional content in partnerships with brands/organizations? *(If yes, proceed with questions 4 and 5. If no, proceed with question 6)*
4. If you do, what are some commonly prominent narratives?
5. If you acknowledge some questions or negative feedback from your audience about the brand/organization you are partnering with, would you want the brand/organization to address that? Would you inform the brand/organization about that?
6. What factors do you think would make a brand partnership also benefit your audience?
7. How do you differentiate between an advertising contract and a communication partnership?
8. To what extent do you agree with the statement that an influencer should be a communicator between their audience and the brand/organization they partner with, instead of a one-way communication channel for brands/organizations to deliver their ideas and key messages?
9. How do you think that practice might benefit you and your audience?
10. What would be your main concerns about that practice?



## Appendix D - Debriefing Statement

Dear <name>,

You are invited to participate in our research, titled Brand Publics Participatory Approach via YouTuber influencers in Strategic Communications.

You will be asked about your professional experiences and opinions related to this new approach, as well as your ideas for effective tactics for brand communications through influencers. The common themes and insights from your answers are expected to further inform the framework's background and to be incorporated into the proposed suggestions.

You will be asked to participate in a 1-hour long interview via phone or computer. Your answer will be anonymized; The interview will be audio recorded, then all data will be stored on the involved researchers' password-protected personal computers/laptops and can only be accessed by the respective researchers. They will be deleted entirely after the study is peer-reviewed and approved by the Graduate Supervisory Committee.

While your participation is entirely voluntary, you have every right to withdraw your consent at any time without any penalty. Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Any information that might link your responses to you will be removed.

This study has been approved by the KSU IRB. For questions concerning participant rights, please contact the IRB Chair, Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, (785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu. The following investigators are also available for questions about this study: Dr. Katie Olsen, at olsenk@ksu.edu; and Vi Tran, at vittv@ksu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration and participation!

TO: Katie Olsen  
AQ Miller School of Media and Communication  
Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number: IRB-11564

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair  
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 02/28/2023

RE: Proposal Entitled, “Brand Publics Participatory Approach via YouTuber influencers in Strategic Communications.”

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written – and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §104(d), category:Exempt Category 2 Subsection ii.**

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, the University Research Compliance Office, and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 02/28/2023 12:36 PM ET